

The Story of Job - How the Introduction Sets the Stage

An Ancient Thought-Experiment

So you're in the Old Testament book of Job. Way to go! Get ready for the mental rollercoaster that lies ahead! You've stepped into one of the most sophisticated and mind-bending literary works in the Bible. This book has been designed to stimulate your mind and heart by raising huge questions about God's character and the meaning of human suffering. But just so you know, no straightforward answers lie within. Rather, the reader is invited to ponder the pain and complaining of Job (Job 1-3, 19, 29-31), the puzzling speeches of God (Job 38-41), and the surprise conclusion of the whole story (Job 42). Most people finish the book feeling unsure they got the point, but convinced they've experienced something profound.

There is one particular challenge that modern readers face when reading the book of Job, and that's the narrative introduction that gets the story moving. The strange conversation between God and "the satan" figure in Job 1-2 is often misunderstood in a way that derails readers from comprehending the main ideas of the book. So let's clarify a few things that will set you up to read this book with more understanding.

Who is This "satan"?

We are first introduced to Job as a "blameless and upright man" (Job 1:1) and shown examples of his extreme piety. He loves God and his family so much, he offers sacrifices for the "hypothetical" sins of his children (Job 1:2-7). This guy's incredible!

All of a sudden, we're transported to God's divine command center, the heavenly throne-room, where God's executive staff reports for duty. This is a very familiar image in the Old Testament that describes God as the sovereign King over all creation (see 1 Kings 22:13-23, and Psalm 103:20-21). He's like a king who daily assembles his officers, surveys the land, and then sends them off for various missions (the context of Isaiah's commission in Isa 6:1-8). We're told in Job 1:6 that God's subservient divine beings (called "sons of God") report for duty as usual, and that one standing among them is "the satan."

Now let's stop here: who or what is "the satan?" Let's first set the record straight, this word is not a proper name, like our modern translations that use the capital letter ("Satan") might lead us to conclude. The Hebrew word *satan* is a descriptive noun, describing any person that stands "opposed to" or as "an adversary" to someone else. For example, King Solomon faced multiple invading enemies near the end of his reign, Hadad the Edomite and Rezon, son of Eliada (1 Kings 11:14, 11:23). Both of these men are called in Hebrew "a satan," that is, an adversary. King David himself is called "a satan" by the Philistines (1 Sam 29:4). The word "satan" can be used to describe an accusing attorney in a courtroom (see Ps 109:6-7). And pay attention to this one, "the angel of the Lord" is described as "a satan," who opposes the infamous Balaam (see Num 22:22, 32). So even the angelic messenger who represents the will and authority of God himself can take on the function of a satan. One conclusion from this short Hebrew word study is that a variety of people or heavenly beings can be described by the word satan. This means that the satan who appears in Job 1-2 is not necessarily identical with the full-orbed evil being called by that same title in the New Testament (see, for example, Mark 1:13).

In fact, a heavenly figure called "the satan" appears only twice in the Old Testament. Both stories take place in the heavenly courtroom where a "good guy" stands before God and his staff and is then accused

by “the one opposed” (or, the satan). In Zechariah 3:1-5, the satan is a figure in the divine throne room accusing the high priest of Israel for being guilty of sin (symbolized by dirty clothes). And God’s response is that Israel and its representative priest are no longer guilty because Israel’s exile has been sufficient punishment for breaking their covenant with God (see Zechariah 1-2). Now that the exile is over, God is giving Israel a “new chance,” so to speak, symbolized by giving the high priest a new, clean set of clothes. In this context, the satan is not evil or sinister. Rather, he represents the just and right accusation that Israel is guilty before God, and God counters this member of his staff by saying that Israel stands forgiven.

So What’s the Point of the “satan”?

Something similar is happening in Job 1-2, except the nature of the satan’s opposition is different. When God presents Job as a stellar example of human virtue and piety, the satan raises the possibility that Job’s good behavior could be explained in a very different way (Job 1:8-9). Isn’t it possible that Job’s virtuous behavior is motivated by selfishness? If Job knows that good behavior brings divine blessing and abundance, then he could have all kinds of reasons for being “blameless and upright.” If that were the case, then Job’s goodness isn’t really that good, and even more importantly, it calls into question God’s basic policy of rewarding those who honor and follow him: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” the satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land” (Job 1:9-10).

This line is crucial for understanding the main ideas being explored in the book of Job. Hebrew Bible scholar John Walton puts it this way:

The satan challenges God’s policy of rewarding the righteous by suggesting that it corrupts their motives and proves them to be less righteous. This accusation gives the book an interesting twist, for while we might be inclined (along with Job and his friends) to spend time asking why righteous people suffer, the satan turns the question upside down and asks why they should prosper. In this way, the book gives us the answers we need to a question we rarely think to ask, rather than the answers we thought we wanted. – John Walton, *The Book of Job* [adapted quote]

The big question most people walk away with after reading Job 1-2 is, why did God allow Job to undergo such suffering? It’s crucial to realize that the satan is not a sinister figure bent on hurting Job. And, God isn’t a cruel gambler, giving into Satan’s evil desires. That’s the wrong story, but one that is commonly imported into the book.

Not about Good vs. Evil

The book of Job is ancient Israelite wisdom literature, and its purpose isn’t to teach us about how Satan and God make bets and leave innocent people’s fates hanging in the balance. Rather, it begins with a typical day in the divine oval office, and the topic of God’s just operation of the cosmos is put on the table. “Is it really wise or just for God to reward the righteous? What if it corrupts their motives?” It raises the question of whether God should reward all good deeds and punish all bad ones, if he does at all? Is it possible that people could experience horrible pain and not deserve it? Can very selfish, awful people really succeed in God’s good world? If so, what does that tell me about the character and purposes of God? Can I draw conclusions about God’s character based off of my observations of the moral order of the universe? Again, John Walton:

The scene in heaven is not trying to explain why Job or any of us suffer. Job is never told about that scene, nor would he have derived any comfort from it. As I have taught Job to students over the years, the

question frequently arises, “What sort of God is this who uses his faithful ones as pawns in bets with the devil?” I would suggest that this question is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the prologue. The scene in heaven, like the speeches of Job’s friends, is part of the literary design of a thought experiment to generate discussion about how God runs the cosmos. The prologue is not trying to teach us how Job got into such a difficult situation, or what angelic beings do or do not have access to God’s presence. The message of the book is offered at the end, in the speeches of God, not in the opening scenario, which only sets up the thought experiment. The book is focusing on how God works in the world, not teaching us about how things work in heaven. – John Walton, *The Book of Job* [adapted quote]

The book of Job introduces us to a man who, by God’s own admission, is blameless and upright and who suffers “for no reason” (Job 2:3). Can such a thing happen in God’s good world? This is the theological and ethical question being explored in the poetic dialogues to follow in Job 3-27.

The Real Takeaway

A helpful way of understanding the book of Job was offered by a Jewish scholar named Matisyahu Tsevat. He proposed that the book is exploring three claims made about God and Job, but only two can be true at the same time.

1. God is Just and Good: God’s character compels him to always act justly for the good of others
2. The Retribution Principle: God has ordered the world so that good deeds are rewarded, and evil deeds are punished
3. Job’s Innocence: Job has done nothing to deserve his suffering

The whole argument of Job’s friends is that

1. God is just and good, by which they mean that
2. God has ordered the moral universe to run by the retribution principle.

On this account, Job’s suffering must, therefore, be the result of some evil for which he’s being punished.

Job’s argument is that (3) he has done nothing wrong to warrant this suffering as a punishment. And we the readers know that he’s right! The author said so in Job 1:1, and God said Job was innocent in 2:3! Job also holds (2) that God runs the world by means of the retribution principle, which leads him to the brink of an awful conclusion. Maybe God is not just or good, or, even worse, maybe God is incompetent at running the universe.

Job and his friends run round and round on the hamster wheel of their dialogues for 24 chapters (Job 3-27), never coming to any resolution about their debate, which opens up the possibility that they are all wrong. Perhaps (1) God is just and good, and (3) Job is innocent. Maybe what needs to be examined is their assumption that all suffering is a form of divine punishment and all abundance is a form of reward.

This is the real focus of the book of Job, and you can see how the heavenly scene of Job 1-2 sets us up perfectly to focus on these difficult theological and ethical issues. The character of the satan has no power over Job or God. He’s like a cardboard cutout character in the story, whose only role is to raise the questions that are the real focus of this book. Those questions are highlighted for us in the dialogues of Job and his friends, but never resolved. It’s only in the central poem of Job 28, and in God’s speeches (Job 38-41) that we discover the real message of the book. That’s what we’ll explore in the next blog.